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ABSTRACT

Several summers of engaging in dialogue and debate have led one scholar to examine closely the ways and means of English Studies in light of contemporary conditions and restraints--particularly as pertains to American literature. As a woman of African American descent, she appreciates Black Southern culture. As their rhetorical and literary history illustrates, African American women writers and readers seem to perceive a certain inevitability about their stations in life. Writers such as Alice Walker and Anna Julia Cooper present metaphorical strategies for countering such inevitability. There seems to exist among African American women a deeply encoded message that encourages them to seize every opportunity to count. Choices in curricula, content, pedagogy, and assessment present such opportunities. Every day English teachers structure activities designed to enable them and their students to develop their powers of imagination to the extent that they can envision a world in which people have the courage and compassion to imagine themselves in better worlds and the commitment to work relentlessly to make it so. English teachers must act with the courage of their well-deliberated convictions and with compassion that emphasizes an individual's interconnectedness with others. Teachers must teach with a desire to talk and listen well, with an understanding that survival is a cooperative venture, and that teaching and learning are a human enterprise. (SAM)

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Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you teach

By Jacqueline Jones Royster

Ms. Royster delivered the Elizabeth Drew Lecture for the summer of 1993 at Bread Loaf/Vermont, The Burgess Meredith Little Theatre. The main points of her lecture follow.

For the last two summers here at Bread Loaf in the company of others who have been, not only willing, but particularly able to engage in intense dialogue and debate, I have taken the rather free-wheeling opportunity that this place offers to shake out my thoughts and beliefs as we have examined rather closely the ways and means of English Studies in light of contemporary conditions and constraints. Of specific concern has been the reading, teaching, and valuing of literature, and especially what is becoming increasingly problematic—American literature. Our dialogues have questioned in provocative ways the history, context, and boundaries of what we do and don't do, and our debates have mirrored the comparably intense debates that are generally acting themselves out in academic environments across the country and around the world.

Carrying on these conversations here at Bread Loaf is not just a popular thing to do, but a critically important thing to do. I believe that, in particular, those of us who teach, at whatever level, owe this intense thought and talk to our students back home whose learning we are shaping and whose understanding we are helping to direct. I consider this collective responsibility of ours to be one to which we must bring the fullness of our personal and professional integrity. . .

I am a woman of African descent who joyfully embraces Black Southern culture because I find such richness there. I consider myself to be a rather metaphorical person who simply delights in the notion that things like symbols and metaphors exist in the world. I say occasionally that I think in pictures, but whether I really do or not, I do appreciate a good image, and the South—Black and otherwise—is filled with sayings that trigger for me good images. Let me begin by sharing one. When I was growing up, I remember hearing people say, "I woke up this morning in my right mind." Over the years, I've come to appreciate the meaning of this statement much more deeply than I ever imagined as a child, understanding now that it's really rather difficult sometimes to wake up in your right mind. For the last ten years or so, I've counted myself lucky in this regard. My research has centered on the public discourse of African American women, and I can clearly attribute many of my feelings of right-mindedness to the escalating sense of identity that I have found with these writers. They speak to my head. They speak to my heart. They speak to my soul. They are "dark spinners of word magic," and I rejoice in my knowing of them as I continue to be amazed that others do not.

As evidenced by much in African American women's rhetorical and literary history, my foremothers and contemporary sisters seem to have perceived, as I believe that I do, a certain inevitability about our stations in life, whether we see those stations as constructed, or assumed, or assigned, or a little bit of all of this and more. Because, most often, the positions from which we think and speak tend to be the way that they are, i.e., at best non-supportive, and because within these contexts we tend to be the way that we are, i.e., defiant and outrageous, there seems to prevail in our public lives at least the notion that each moment at the podium is worth treating as the only moment.

Often the sense of urgency for African American women writers is such that we can perceive no opportunity to be heard as expendable. So, when Alice Walker, for example, makes a seemingly simple statement in *Living by the Word*, I sense an urgency. In this collection of essays, she discusses her relationships with both human and non-human beings. At the end of the collection, she says:

> The Universe responds. What you ask of it, it gives. . . Teach yourself peace. Pass it on (192-93).

My experience with African American women writers tells me that this statement is not a casual remark intended to be just an interesting and somewhat mystical turn of phrase. I understand that in *Living by the Word*, Alice Walker woke up in her right mind, filled her pages with passion, thoughtfulness, and urgency and that this statement is a message from a "two-headed woman" who lives by the word and walks on.

Sometimes, there seems to exist among African American women, perhaps in our bone marrow, a deeply encoded message that encourages us to try as we are able to make every opportunity count, and we tend to do so with passion.

How pleased I am that I have available to me these women's words, the ways in which they articulate their lives and visions, the ways in which they strum both the joy and pain of my soul, the ways in which they sing my life in their songs. They help me to feel that I have the capacity to wake up in my right mind and to help other people to try to do that as well.

In my most optimistic of moods, I say that the reading, teaching, and valuing of literature constitute a core of what has come to be for me ongoing challenges, interests, and beliefs that seem to surface and resurface in all sorts of ways as I move or find myself confronted in this academic arena as teacher, scholar, and active member of the profession of English studies.

At other, less optimistic, times I feel besieged when people automatically assume, not only that I have a substantive opinion about all dimensions of a terribly complex dilemma—which I usually do, but also that I have answers that might actually translate into a magic set of tried and true solutions that will most certainly work for them—which I know that nobody that I know really does. When I'm not feeling besieged, I sometimes feel haunted by thoughts that just seem to linger and linger in one form

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or another in my heart and in my consciousness, and that is when I come up with titles like *Eat, Drink, and Be Merry, for Tomorrow You Teach*.

In keeping with yet another African American tradition, I could consider these words "conjure words" and ask that you open yourselves to the possibilities of the images that the conjuring spirits might evoke.

Let's consider Bread Loaf to be a training ground in pretty much the same way that the nation state of Sparta had for its warriors a training ground. When we read, analyze, assess, teach, and value literature, what are we really trying to do? Not just what is the focus of our efforts (as in which texts) or even the nature of the work, but what are the terms of the engagement? What are the principles by which we live as a nation, as a people, as human beings in the presence of other human beings that would make, or perhaps should make, it reasonable to select, arrange, and preserve the pieces that we do in the ways that we do?

Somehow we seem to be operating at step two or three or four in the scheme of things without having taken into account the maze of steps that might bring us to a particular point in terms of how classrooms and curricula get made and how learning becomes engaged. My sense has always been that our attention in all of this ruckus over what we will read, analyze, and value is really in the wrong place. It seems to me that we're being distracted by symptoms of our dilemma and not paying enough attention to the sources of it. My intuition tells me that there should be something happening and something acknowledged before these concerns.

Continuing in this intuitive mode, the voice that I hear so persistently in my head is Anna Julia Cooper's voice. In 1892 in a collection of essays entitled *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, Cooper says:

> Our money, our schools, our governments, our free institutions, our systems of religion and forms of creeds are all first and last to be judged by this standard: what sort of men and women do they grow? . . . I shall not try to test your logic, but weigh your results—and that test is the measure of the stature of the fullness of man (282-283).

On several occasions the echoes and reverberations of this quote have pushed me to consider, much more directly than my training in English Studies has encouraged, the question of what sort of human beings I would ideally want to see our choices of curricula, pedagogy, content, and assessment to produce. My training did not encourage me to include such questions in my definition of quality or value or excellence in the teaching, learning, and valuing of literature. The model that I experienced fits more comfortably into a mode that privileges subject matter, not people. My training encouraged me to consider the center of the enterprise to be the literature, and not just any literature, but literature that has stood some ill-defined test of time. My job was to find creative ways to convince all kinds of students from all kinds of backgrounds that literature and the liberal arts in general are essentially to be loved, appreciated, embraced pretty much for their own sake, as a sign of culture and achievement, and used perhaps to soothe a savage beast, but not necessarily for such mundane things as the possibility that teaching and learning are about people or that the teaching and learning of literature has residual effects in terms of the sort of people that are left in the wake of whatever the formal teaching and learning have been.

In my formal education, I was not primed to take into account the impact of my choices, only the glory of them. I was not sensitized to the idea that literature, as a product of hearts, minds, and souls is by default also a mechanism by which hearts, minds, and souls can be touched, expanded, and encouraged to break through the boundaries of their own personal histories and even their known and unknown potential.. I was not alerted even to the notion that teaching and learning are in direct response to the world in which we live and in direct service of the needs that our society has determined that schools, colleges, and universities as socio-cultural institutions will meet. Nor, heaven forbid, was I ever encouraged to even guess that there might ever be the notion that a term like "American literature" is in essence a deeply rooted socio-cultural construction that, in effect, we have been re-inventing in each generation since we started thinking about such a thing.

Cooper's words, though, suggest to me that the center of the academic enterprise, with the reading, teaching, and valuing of texts as one dimension of it, is not texts at all or even institutional mandates. The center of the enterprise is people, and the ways in which we nurture and sustain them as they are enabled to gain access to information, to process and use that information variously, and to articulate, interpret, and reinterpret and render for themselves visions, lives, history, and culture. The ongoing task is trying to figure out the uses to be made of resources, tools, and strategies in the interest of human beings who should be able to develop to the fullest of their possibilities.

For me, then, the very first—perhaps the only, and certainly the most critical—term of engagement in the reading, teaching, and valuing of literature is that human beings, not books, are at the center of the enterprise. What this means to me is that everything keys to this principle, so that the first act of teaching and learning for me is to acknowledge who the human beings are (students and teachers) who are engaged in this process and to offer tickets of admission into my classroom to as many

of these individual distinctions as I can. as I make and remake my courses.

Our work is high risk. We structure activities that take us and our students through all kinds of zones that have within them danger, the danger of growth, the danger of intellectual development, the danger of learning, the danger of seeing that human beings in all of their variety are after all quite human. A basic challenge is to find ways to encourage people to develop their powers of imagination and then to use them so that they are able to operate as learners with the expectation of surviving the inevitable chaos of it all and still managing to find their own rewards. My dream is to see a world in which people have the courage and compassion to imagine themselves in better worlds and the commitment to work relentlessly to make it so.

I believe that we will always find that teaching in our world demands conscious thought and that there will be an everpresent need to think more flexibly about what we want a course or a curriculum to do and why we want it to do that, based on which and whose assessment of needs, in response to what demands; in keeping with what visions, values, attitudes, and on what intellectual authority—toward what ends, outcomes, expectations. These questions about vision, values, attitudes, and expectations inform how and why we shape and direct our teaching and constitute the genesis of intellectual power, authority, and also responsibility.

On our shoulders is the responsibility of deciding well, not just in good faith, but in good conscience with good information and considerable thought. We must think beyond the singularity of the teaching of literature, or developing literacy, or making curricula. We must act with the courage of our well-deliberated convictions, with compassion that underscores a recognition of our interconnectedness with others, with a desire to talk and to listen well, with an understanding that survival is a cooperative venture, and that teaching and learning are a human enterprise. So, again, remember this metaphor—eat of the food of Bread Loaf, drink from the nectar of Vermont, rejoice in the company of your conspirators, and ready yourselves, for tomorrow you teach, and if we are lucky our students will learn and so will we all.

Ms. Royster is the Director of the UniversityWriting Center and Associate Professsor of English at Ohio State University and Program Chair of the 4 C's. Two of her recent books include Doublestitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters *(editorial team) and* Writer's Choice, *a language arts textbook.*

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